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ABSTRACT

Recorded observations, camera work, conversations with 19 children in grades K-4 in a Nebraska 2-room school house, and interviews with the teacher were techniques used to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the small rural school environment and its impact on children. Five attributes were found to be significant and unique small school advantages: the daily classroom routines, the use of learning by group methods, the interdependence demonstrated by the children, the independence of the children, and the community's involvement in the school. In addition to these advantages, there was a congruity between the school's values and the community's values that promoted an environment for children that was both academically strong and emotionally secure. The teachers reported no difference in general academic performance between urban and rural children. Although a review of literature on rural education described many disadvantages (inadequate teacher preparation, poor educational materials, outdated texts, inbred groups of students, lack of confidentiality, and lack of resource people and materials), the only deficit evidenced in this rural school was a lack of resources due to geographic location. (Author/NEC)

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ABSTRACT

The Unique School Environment of Rural Children

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This paper describes the multiple methods of observation used to determine the effects of a rural education (a two-room school). Five attributes were found to be significant and unique: (1) its daily classroom routines, (2) the use of learning by group methods, (3) the interdependence demonstrated by the children, (4) the independence of the children, and (5) the community's involvement in the school. In addition to these advantages, there is a congruity between the school's values and the community's values. This promotes an environment for children that is both academically strong and emotionally secure. Disadvantages are the lack of resources due to geographic location.

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AERA Paper: The Unique School Environment of Rural Children

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Perspectives/Theoretical Framework:

The decline in the number of rural schools is partly due to population shifts. Another factor is improved transportation, both vehicles and roads. State legislators have generally encouraged school consolidation, partially based on the literature which describes the lower quality of education obtained in rural schools, and partially on increased finances and strained tax structures. While increased finances and tax structures are citizen concerns, the quality of education is of definite concern to educators.

For the most part, literature has cited poor teachers, inadequate supplies, dearth of resources, outdated texts and materials as reasons for the lower quality of education. Another disadvantage frequently listed was the inbred group of students, that is, no or few changes in the student group from kindergarten to eighth grade. Also cited was the lack of confidentiality due to the small town or rural atmosphere.

The above given factors did not match the positive nostalgic remembrances that I frequently heard. I wanted to evaluate the rural school environment and its impact on children.

Methodology and Data Source:

An observational study was conducted in a two-room schoolhouse

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in the academic year 1978-79 in order to study the effects of a rural education. I recorded observations and took pictures that illustrated my recordings. There were 19 children in the "lower room" in kindergarten through fourth grades; 15 children were in the "higher room" in grades fifth through eighth. Efforts were concentrated in the lower room because of its greater number of children, grades, and its task of introducing children to a rural school.

Using observational research data from a study of Nebraska's "special children," I was struck by five attributes that I consider significant and unique to rural schools. These are: 1) its routines, 2) the use of learning by group methods, 3) the interdependence of the children, 4) the independence of the children, and 5) the community's involvement. It has been found that these attributes contribute not only to academic skills but also to a personal sense of belonging and competence. Recorded observations and camera work were used to detail daily activities - classroom and recess - in order to describe the rural school environment. Conversations with the children attempted to understand the setting from the child's point of view. Interviews with the teacher focused on their perceptions of the rural school environment. The result is a description of what happens in a two-room schoolhouse; its advantages and disadvantages.

Results:

1) School Routines

To watch 19 children in 5 different grades quietly and confidently move through activities and duties of a school day is amazing. Routines are structured so that children start the day, do their workbooks, go to the bathroom, get assistance, tell stories, and go to the library - all with a minimum of noise and disruption. Mundane tasks, such as instructions for individual work or a spelling test, have to be handled differently in a rural schoolroom. The rural teacher has perfected such a system, and the children are comfortably adapted to that system. A measure of the system's success is when the teacher leaves the room there is no behavior change. Children continue their work. All discipline is handled within the room or school. There is no principal to send children to. The ultimate punishment is to call the parents to come get the child.

Some of the routines are nearly universal in the United States; the pledge of allegiance and the acknowledgement of day, month, and year are such routines. Others, however, are particularly designed for a multi-grade classroom. The spelling test is one such routine. All of the children take the spelling test at the same time. A testing atmosphere is created by the teacher; she calls out one spelling work for each grade in turn. The first graders "drop out" first since they have the fewest spelling words. The children correct their papers, then the teacher checks with each one and records

their score in the grade book.

These routines contribute to the "everyone knows everything" environment in the classroom and in the school. Information is readily available as to how each student is performing and this information is rapidly transmitted to all in that classroom and soon to students in the other classroom. While there was some rare chiding for inferior work, generally progress evaluations were treated as a matter of fact. Due to the group being closely knit and of long duration, such personal information was not regarded by the children as secret but as common group knowledge.

2) Learning by Groups

Each grade meets with the teacher, as a group, twice a day. The children in each grade leave their desks and gather around a large table off to the side of the room. This group works on various subject matter - reading, math, social studies. As a grade group, these children study a new concept, practice it, and then are given workbook assignments on this new concept. The children return to their desks and do their assignments. Meanwhile, the next grade group is at the table with the teacher working on their subject matter.

If a student needs individual assistance while the teacher is occupied with another group, he/she can either go to an older student or peer, or can wait until the teacher stops group work. The student waits patiently, standing at the table where the group works. I was amazed at the patience displayed by the children.

Both teachers acknowledged the need for a teacher aide. This person would provide assistance to the four grades working at their desks. Such help would free the teacher to work solely with one grade at the worktable.

The textbooks used were 5 years old and urban-oriented. One story was about a farmer who was portrayed as a bumpkin. When questioned, several children said farmers weren't like that. I don't know if it's possible to obtain textbooks with both urban and rural orientations. A dual orientation would be ideal since this is the world these children live in. They are in a rural area but also familiar with a nearby large metropolitan city.

3) Interdependence

The interdependence among the children was the most striking quality in this school. The younger children often approached the older children for help with their school work. Urban schools artificially try to create this by setting up peer teaching programs. The younger children commented that one learns more this way because you get help from other kids. I would add that the older children are learning by teaching others; often that is the most effective way to learn.

An example of this interdependence was displayed when a group of children were examining birds' nests constructed as a science project. The younger children were admiring one nest in particular and were somewhat jealous. "She has older brothers and sisters who can help her." Having older siblings is viewed as an

asset; the siblings' assistance is valuable in doing well in school and maybe at home too.

The mixing of ages and grades is seen not only in the classroom but at recess, also. At recess children discuss schoolwork as well as personal, social concerns with children who are the same age, older, and younger. Sometimes the younger children are the observers when older children are talking; the 6-year-old observers watch and listen, taking in what it means to be 8 or 9 years old.

At recess the only division in play is by sex. In several games it's the boys against the girls. In "Surround" and "Chicken" there are elaborate rules the children have constructed. The winning sex in both games is determined by the number of boys or girls still "free" or "standing". In other games, such as "Annie, Annie, Over" there is sex mixing with throwing ability the key attribute. The ball is thrown over the schoolhouse by competing teams. This game is almost exclusively played by the children in the "higher room."

4) Independence

The independence of the children is evidenced by the work effort and self discipline in solitary work at the desk. Children have assignments to do by a certain hour or day. The children turn in their work to a certain place on the teacher's desk. Kindergarteners, as novices to this independent system, had workbooks missing.

The workbooks of older children were never observed to be lost or missing. The first to fourth graders were adept at submitting

and receiving workbooks with no personal contact with the teacher. When an assignment was completed the children would place the workbook in the "in" file on the teacher's desk.

There is an "out" file on the teacher's desk with workbooks or papers already corrected by the teacher. I was amazed at how regularly these papers were returned to the students. I assumed that a student was assigned to do this task. After inquiring from several children, I discovered that it was not assigned. A student decides that workbooks need to be distributed and that he/she has the time to do it. This kind of independent behavior is characteristic of the classroom, perhaps reflecting a value of the community as well.

5) Community Involvement

That brings me to the fifth variable, the community. I was surprised at the number and kind of visitors to the school, and at the reception by the students. Mothers, and fathers as well, would stop in to bring forgotten homework or papers. Mothers provide a hot lunch once a month and also plan holiday parties. One mother was in to observe how her oldest child, a kindergartener, was doing in school and how she could help him at home. The school board president stops in to check on things that need repair and in general to see how things are going. Babies and toddlers have been in with mothers preparing a lunch or party and they are readily accepted into the classroom.

The children respond positively to the visitors by direct

communication and by involving the visitor in their activities. There is little whispering or boisterous behavior that is commonly seen in urban classrooms. Most children continue with their individual work while a few children, on their own, get more involved with the visitor.

An example of this hospitable reception was the way kindergarteners were welcomed into the classroom. At times these 5 year olds would wander from desk to desk just to see what the others were doing. Their observations were obviously "OK" with older students. An older student may engage in conversation, explaining what they were doing, or may help a kindergartener do his/her own work. A lot of positive nonverbal behavior, such as smiling, was directed at the kindergarteners by the older children in the room.

Kindergarteners spend a full day in school in the second half of the school year. They arrive in January. The teacher explained that the first to fourth graders are working independently by that time, and thus she can devote more time to the kindergarteners. The other advantage to this arrangement is the reduced transportation that would be required of parents. Since all but one of the kindergarteners have older siblings in school, these kindergarteners are taken and picked up from school at the same time as other children are.

Summary:

I saw several advantages for children and their parents in

this rural school. The review of the literature on rural education described many disadvantages. Reminiscences of older people educated in rural schools also detail the deficits in such an educational system. Many of the reported deficits are: the teacher's inadequate preparation, the poor educational materials, the outdated texts, and the lack of resource people and materials.

The teachers reported no difference in general academic performance between urban and rural children. While there is a lack of resources due to geographic locations, this is a relative lack. A music teacher comes weekly to the school. Arrangements for physical education instruction were pursued but such extensive travel for the children was not feasible. A school nurse visits annually. This is one area that possibly could be expanded. The school nurse and/or county health department might be able to conduct a health education program. I know this has been done in other rural schools. There was no evidence of more of the above reported deficits in this rural school.

The observed positive qualities far outweigh the disadvantages and, more importantly, the values emphasized in the school reflect the community's values. This match of values is rarely achieved in heterogenous urban schools. Value congruence between home and school certainly fosters a secure, stable world for children to grow in.

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